

COLUMBUS AND HIS ALLEGED CRIMES.

CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS, insists Count Roselly de Lorgues, one of the only two authors of satisfactory biographies of the hero-navigator, does not belong exclusively to Italy, where he was born; nor to Spain, which he served; but rather to Catholicity, from which he received inspiration, and which, reciprocating, surrounds him with incomparable splendor. This is well said; but we would take issue with the illustrious author when he adds that "to France, after Rome, it belongs, as the eldest daughter of the Church, to celebrate religiously" the fourth centenary of the discovery of America.* In the generous rivalry as to who will be foremost in proclaiming the glories of Columbus, no people have a better right to be in the van than the Catholics of the United States. It needs not that we join in that absurd spread-eagleism which would insinuate that the Church never found a proper field for her labors until this Republic came into existence; there is sufficient reason for congratulation in the past of the American Church, sufficient grounds for hope as to its future, to induce the American Catholic to enter, with more heart and soul than

* In a late letter to the Committee of the International Federation of the Sacred Heart for the Religious Celebration of the Fourth Centenary of the Discovery of America.

any other, into the joys of the coming celebration. And when the spirit of Columbus shall look down upon that recognition of his transcendent merits, it will approve of the American Catholic's part with more zest than it will feel for any other's share; for the great event of the hero's life was not so much a voyage of discovery as a missionary enterprise. "The man who bore Christ in his heart," says Roselly de Lorgues, "as he did in his name, raised His image also on his ship; he had the representation of the Crucified on the royal standard. In the name of Jesus Christ he issued his official order for departure; with that name he began the diary of his voyage; with that name he braved the horrors of the 'tenebrous' sea, and subjugated his mutinous crew; in that name he took possession of the first island to which the Divine Goodness led him. There he planted the Cross, and dedicated the land to the Saviour, imposing upon it the blessed name of San Salvador.'" *

It is a remarkable fact that while most of the contemporaries of Columbus seem to have been indifferent as to his glory, the Holy See was ever prodigal with its sympathy for his work. Three successive Popes manifested their affection for him; and at the time when he suffered so much from detraction, he was honored by the friendship of many members of the Sacred College. Pope Leo X. used to listen, during the winter evenings, to read-

* Idem.

ings of his adventures as narrated by Peter Martyr of Anghiera. It was under the auspices of Pope Innocent XI. that the learned Oratorian, Bozius, published his "Signs of the Church of God," in which he applied many of the olden prophecies to Columbus. Cardinal Bernardine Carvajal held a correspondence with Peter Martyr of Anghiera in reference to the navigator; and Cardinal Louis of Aragon sent one of his secretaries to that *littérateur* to record what he had learned from the lips of the navigator himself. Cardinal Bembo devoted a chapter of his "History of Venice" to the voyages of our hero. It was by invitation of several cardinals that Julius Cæsar Stella undertook his Latin epic on the New World, which Cardinal Alexander Farnese caused to be read to his colleagues assembled for recreation in his villa. Cardinal Sforza-Pallavicino gave much space of his "Fasti Sacri" to Columbus. Cardinal Valerio, in his work on the "Consolations of the Church," glorifies the navigator, and applies some of the prophecies of Isaias to his mission. The poet Gambara sang of the wonderful voyages on the invitation of the famous statesman, Cardinal Granvelle. It was Cardinal Mendoza, Archbishop of Toledo, known as the "third King of Spain," who first presented Columbus to Ferdinand and Isabella. Among the first to applaud the design of the Italian sailor was Mgr. Geraldini, the papal nuncio at the Spanish court. The nuncio took up the cause of Columbus against certain theologians, who imagined that he implied the existence of other

worlds not mentioned in Genesis; and he convinced Cardinal Mendoza that the Columbian theory did not contradict St. Augustine or Nicholas of Lyra, who, for that matter, he observed, were not cosmographers or navigators.* And while the Papacy was thus preventing even Italy, his native land, from forgetting the honor due to her illustrious son, perhaps the only circumstance that kept his memory alive in the rest of the world was that stupid story of the egg with the broken end.† “The story pleased children, and the first German narrative on the subject of Columbus was designed for their amusement.” ‡

Until very late years, strange to say, few writers treated at all extensively of Columbus; indeed, only

* Cantù: “*Illustri Italiani*,” art. “*Colombo*.”

† Lamartine, in his imaginative biography of Columbus, locates the scene of this exhibition in the banquet-hall of King Ferdinand. Others describe it as occurring at the feast given in honor of the Grand Admiral by Cardinal Mendoza. None of the Spanish historians speak of it; the first to do so was the Milanese Benzoni; and he, thinks De Lorgues, must have confused some of his childish recollections. The story of the egg is, in all likelihood, of Italian origin. “It is attributed with much probability to Brunelleschi, the architect of the cupola of Sta. Maria del Fiore. In this supposition, the idea, inept as it is, is not impossible. At a table where are assembled a lot of Florentine artists, free-and-easy banterers and scoffers, such frivolity is comprehensible; but nowhere else.” Nearly all smart sayings, observed Voltaire, recalling the application of this tale to Brunelleschi, are repetitions. (“*Essai sur les Mœurs*,” ch. 145.)

‡ De Lorgues, vol. i, b. 2.

two such, Humboldt and Irving, were well known to English readers. Both of these being Protestants, it is not surprising that the religious aspect of the life of the hero was presented in a distorted fashion, or, at best, in a very inadequate manner. Nor did the scientific side of the navigator's career receive a strictly just treatment from the school represented by these two authors. For instance, Robertson consoles his insular jealousy with the assurance that if the sagacity of Columbus had not made America known to us, some happy accident would have done so at some other time. Otto contended that the Genoese discovered nothing, since America had been visited by Europeans long before his day. It was reserved to our times to produce two really satisfactory narratives of this wonderful and edifying life: one by the Frenchman, Roselly de Lorgues; the other by the Italian, Tarducci. These authors alone seem to have been willing, and, being willing, to have been able, to properly delineate the not easily appreciated career of him who, when presenting his gift of a new world to their Spanish Majesties, conjured them "to allow no foreigner to establish himself therein for commercial purposes, unless he were a Catholic; to permit entrance even to no Spaniard, unless he were a true Christian; for the design and execution of this enterprise have had no other object than the growth and glory of the Christian religion."* The Protestant and

* "Y digo que Vuestras Altezas no deben consentir que aqui trate ni haga pié ninguno extrangero, salvo catolicos cris-

philosophistic school could not be expected to readily abandon the field which it had been used to regard as its own. It is not unnatural that a Harvard professor should have volunteered to restore the lagunes which De Lorgues and Tarducci had filled up, and to re-envelop the life of Columbus in the haze which they had dissipated. But the work of Justin Winsor is of too flimsy a nature to be welcomed by the scientific; indeed, one can discover no reason for its appearance, save that implied by the zeal with which the writer has endeavored to show that our hero was a very ordinary man, and the almost ghoulish appetite which he displays for the imperfections which his school has ever pretended to discern in an almost perfect character.

The faults of Irving in his treatment of Columbus are mostly of a negative kind. The deliberate calumniator is absent in his lucubrations; most of his sins are those of omission; and probably they would not have to be deplored, had his religious and political environment permitted him to see the appropriateness, if not the necessity, of avoiding them. Thus, it was a grave historical fault for him to commit when, treating of the landing at San Salvador, he said nothing of the erection by Columbus of an immense cross, in sign of his having taken possession of that territory in the name of our Lord

tianos, pues este fué el fin y el comienzo del proposito que fuese par acrecentamiento y gloria de la religion cristiana."

Jesus Christ.* However, most of his school can not be so leniently treated by the Catholic critic. Humboldt charges Columbus with inflexible severity and cruelty; with the violation of the personal liberty of the Indians, and with administrative incapacity. We shall briefly examine these charges, and thus see whether there is any justification for the sole *raison d'être* of Winsor's diatribe.

The charge of inflexible severity is based principally upon the Admiral's treatment of Bernal Diaz, who had formed a conspiracy, a plan of which was found upon his person, and which he did not disavow. But Irving finds that the course of Columbus was quite moderate, inasmuch as he abstained from exercising his undoubted vice-regal prerogative of inflicting condign punishment upon a confessed traitor; simply confining him to one of the ships until he could be forwarded to Spain for trial. His accomplices of inferior rank, adds Irving, were punished according to their degree of guilt, but not with the rigor it deserved.† From this moment, says Charlevoix,‡ this act of necessary justice, in which all formalities were exactly observed, began to entail consequences fatal to Columbus and his whole family. His enemies charged him with

* "Per lasciare un segno d'haver preso la possessione in nome del Signore Jesu Cristo." Ramusio: "Delle Navigazioni e Viaggi," vol. iii, fol. 2.

† B. vi, ch. 8.

‡ "Histoire de St.-Domingue," b. 2.

capriciously outraging Castilian gentlemen; but, remarks Irving, they took good care to be silent concerning the crimes and debaucheries of these gentlemen, and the seditious cabals which the Admiral had so often forgiven.* Modern philanthropists, Humboldt at their head, have affected horror at the punishment which Columbus, in his instructions, recommended as befitting robbers. But punishments vary with times and places. Oviedo, an eye-witness, tells us that among the Indians first found by Columbus, "the sin most abominated was theft."† The native code "prescribed impalement as its penalty." Charlevoix corroborates this account. When the Admiral found himself obliged, in time, to punish theft among the Indians, he substituted for their own penalty one which spared life, while marking the culprits as warnings to others. He cut off the end of the ear or of the nose; as was prescribed in those days by the Code of Valencia,‡ and by that of the Hermandad.§

The charge of cruelty to the Indians is persistently brought against Columbus by English and American writers, and by the entire Protestant school. The picture of only a pitiful remnant of aborigines surviving contact with the Anglo-Saxon

* B. viii, ch. 8.

† "Hist. Nat. de las Indias," b. v, ch. 3.

‡ Tarazona: "Instituciones del Fuero, y Privilegios del Reino de Valencia," vol. viii.

§ Saint-Hilaire: "Histoire d'Espagne," b. xviii.

in North America, while seven-eighths of the population of Spanish and Portuguese America are of pure or mixed Indian blood, is too eloquent a commentary on the respective civilizing capabilities of Protestant and Catholic nations, and on the philanthropic tendencies of the two pioneer white races which disputed the possession of the New World, to allow of any equanimity of temper, or any judicial impartiality, on the part of these gentlemen when treating of this and kindred subjects. In the specification to the effect that Columbus reduced the Indians to slavery, it should be remembered that he never counselled the enslaving of the pacific and mild-mannered savages: it was the ferocious, man-eating, and otherwise indomitable race of the Caribs, whom no kindness or other rule could affect, that he proposed to enslave, for the well-being of the settlers and their own. To the peaceable Indians he was a defender: he caused their persons, families, and property to be respected. It was because of this distinction that the depraved and rapacious among the adventurers of Hispaniola, while the hero's foes at Seville were accusing him of maltreating the natives, wrote to the sovereigns that the Admiral would not countenance the subjection of the Indians to Christians. Even Humboldt recognizes this contradiction. Certainly the Spanish court never reproached the Admiral for severity in administration; nay, when his successor received his final instructions, in the presence of the sovereigns,

the Counsellor of State, Fonseca, advised him to avoid the troubles of Columbus by being, from the beginning of his administration, implacable in face of any attempt at revolt.*

As to the charge of administrative incapacity, why, asks Roselly de Lorgues, should we discuss the governmental acts of Columbus, when facts are more eloquent than any interpretation? "When, after his discovery of the New Continent, he returned sick to Hispaniola, to find insurrection rife among the natives, the Spaniards in rebellion, his own orders contemned, and his subordinates traitors, his position seemed hopeless; for he was without troops, money, or moral aid. Nevertheless, by adroit concessions and able temporizations, he subdued violence, disarmed crime, re-established authority, organized production, and initiated the prosperity of Hispaniola. If that is not administrative ability, explain the prodigy. How can we doubt the administrative talents of Columbus, when we behold this seaman become suddenly, according to necessity, agriculturist, architect, military engineer, constructor of roads and bridges, economist, and a specially able magistrate?" Envy invented this fancied incapacity of the Admiral, in order to mask its own hideously ungrateful designs. It succeeded only too well; but it is certain that even at the time when the person of Columbus was the object of persecution, his colonial regulations, abrogated under

* Herrera: "Hist. Gen. des Conquêtes et Voyages des Castillans dans les Indes Occidentales," b. iv, ch. 13.

the influence of his successors, were soon restored by order of the monarchs.

We have said that the philosophistic, Protestant, and freethinking schools affect to regard Columbus as a very ordinary man. It is not surprising, therefore, that they should gleefully seize upon any chance of showing that our hero sometimes yielded to the grosser frailties of human nature. One instance they have thought to advance, and only one. They tell us that when he lay upon his death-bed, on the very eve of his dissolution, the Admiral was seized with remorse for his conduct toward Doña Beatrice Enriquez, the mother of his natural son, Don Ferdinand. In his last will and testament, therefore, they say, he recommended Beatrice to the care of his son Diego, adding concerning the impelling reason for such recommendation, that it was not proper that he should specify it.* From this ambiguous remark alone, Napione, Spotorno, Navarrete, Humboldt, Irving, and, of course, all the minor fry, of whom Prof. Winsor is the latest spokesman, conclude that Columbus had not married the Lady Enriquez. But if the dying Admiral was so anxious to preserve the fair fame of Beatrice Enriquez as to deem it improper to assign the reason for his recommendation, how came he, in the same

* "La razon de ello no es lecito de escribirla aqui." See the last article in the "Holographic Testament, Written and Recopied by Columbus, on Aug. 25, 1505," in the "Coleccion Diplomatica," docum. 158.

document, to allude to her as the mother of Don Ferdinand? In the supposition that a marriage had taken place, such mention would have been natural, and would have accorded well with the enigmatic words, though we may not grasp their real significance. In the supposition of a culpable relation, Columbus would have defeated his own purpose. Nor can the defamers of the Admiral take any comfort from the fact that he styles Beatrice by the (to us) rather discourteous term of woman, *muger*. To this day what Frenchman speaks of his wife in any other way than as *sa femme*? To what British or Irish peasant are husband and wife other than each other's "man" and "woman?" And that in the days of Columbus *muger* was used by the Spaniards in the sense of "wife," we know from incontestably authentic documents. Thus, Queen Jane, widow of Henry IV., of Spain, in her holographic will of April, 1475, calls herself, *Muger del Rey Don Enrique, que Dios haya.*" Ferdinand styled the great Isabella, "*La Serenissima Reina, Doña Isabel mi muger;*" and he spoke of his second wife, Germaine de Foix, as "*Serenissima Reina, nuestra muy cara y muy amada muger.*"*

Again, the facts in this case have been falsified. The regret of Columbus on his death-bed for any injustice to the Lady Enriquez is purely imaginary; nor did he make any will on the eve of his death.

* "Documentos Ineditos para la Historia de Espana," por Don Mig. Salva.

The codicil which is said to have been drawn up on May 19, 1506, was already more than four years old.* Beatrice Enriquez had married Columbus at Cordova, while she was in the flower of her youth and beauty, and her lover was struggling to obtain a recognition from the Spanish court, a poor, white-headed, and unknown foreigner. When he was about to start on his last and most dangerous voyage, the Admiral remembered that in his "act of majoratus," whereby he had long ago arranged the temporal future of his heirs, he had made for Beatrice no provision of dowry. This act, known to the sovereigns and the Holy See, could not readily be nullified or changed; hence he satisfied his conscience by recommending his wife to the care of his son, and he did not deem it obligatory to inform the world of his reasons. "They who discern in these words," says Roselly de Lorgues, "an avowal wrenched from the remorse of Columbus at the terrible moment of his farewell to life, forget the date of this will. They have confused the drawing up of this holographic document with its presentation, which was effected four years later, on the eve of the Admiral's death. From certain words, the import of which their misconception of this grand character prevented their grasping, they have evolved a theory of an illicit relationship, and of a sterile remorse at the supreme moment. The difference of the dates did not strike them. . . .

† "Col. Dipl.," no 158.

The marriage of Columbus with the Lady Beatrice Enriquez, demonstrated by so many logical inductions, by various documents and other proofs, and recognized by his descendants, was acknowledged by him under his own hand, five years, four months, and eighteen days, before the act of deposit effected on the eve of his death, in an autographic document which has happily come down to us.”*

The class of writers to which Prof. Winsor belongs can find no other passages in the career of Columbus which ask for defensive explanation. It is not strange that they should make the most of this one; for Columbus was a fervent, practical, and uncompromising Catholic. No one can uphold the Catholic standard as he did without becoming a target for the arrows of that school which, until late years, almost monopolized the historical field in English-speaking lands, and in all where the spirit of the world had, through noise and imperturbable effrontery, become the moulder of modern historical opinion. Columbus could not be spared by the calumniators who respected not even the canonized saints of God. Did they not charge St. Cyril of Alexandria with deliberate murder? Had they not presented St. Clothilde as fuming with blind and implacable vindictiveness? Was not the Blessed Robert d'Arbrissel, according to their account, a culpable victim of crazy hallucinations in matters of morality? And had they not dragged

* In Introduction, and in vol. ii, p. 382, 3d edit., 1869.

the sweet Maid of Orleans from her pedestal of glory, and besmirched her virgin-crown with the mud of fallen womanhood? No genius, they said, could be a practical Catholic. The gentle Fénelon, the sublime Mozart, Fontenelle, Cervantes, Montesquieu, and Montaigne, though passing as Catholics, were in reality freethinkers. As to the most universal of all geniuses, Dante, was he not a heretic and a revolutionist? And the grand Savonarola! Even the merely artistic, if they were truly artistic, have to shake off the trammels of Catholic practice. Did not Raphael die of amorous excesses?

Such were some of the calumnies with which the modern dominant historical school was wont to illustrate its theory that true greatness and Catholicity were incompatible. But they are losing much of their force in our day, unless with the wilfully obtuse; and similar charges will not avail much to dim the glory of Columbus the Catholic.